DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 208 499 EA 014 033

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TITLE Educational Reform and Economic Development in Cuba: Recent Developments.
PUB DATE Mar 81
NOTE 12p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Los Angeles, CA, April 13-17, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Developing Nations; *Economic Development; *Educational Change; *Educational Trends; Foreign Countries; Work Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS *Cuba

ABSTRACT

While the overall change in Cuban education came about because of the revolution, expansion took place in several stages, each largely a function of the economic development policy being followed at the time. In the period up to 1964 when Cuba thought it could industrialize under the Soviet model it concentrated on developing basic education for workers and pupils, and developed rural primary schools. In 1964 the "schools to the countryside" movement tried to increase agricultural production and inculcate socialist values by bringing students to work in the sugar fields in the summer. Changes in these plans came about with the failure to meet the sugar quota in 1969-70 and the realization that students were not contributing much and that the country needed better managers and technicians. The most profound shift since 1964 seems to have taken place after 1975 with the decision to boost university education. This came about at the same time that the mechanization of the sugar harvest reduced the need for agricultural workers. A slowdown in the building of schools in the countryside and an increase in urban secondary education have also occurred.
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ED208499

EDUCATIONAL REFORM AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN CUBA: RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

By

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March 1981

We have argued elsewhere (Carnoy and Werthein, 1980) that Cuban educational reform has been closely related to changes in the structure and ideology of economic development. The major change in the last generation has of course been the Cuban revolution of 1959, which began a transformation of the Cuban economy from a path of dependent capitalist development to one of socialist State planning. But it was not only the mode of production which changed; accompanying this change was a drastic shift in ideology from an individual, competitive, consumption orientation to a collective, egalitarian, and revolutionary conception of society.

The educational system changed rapidly after 1959. The Cuban government committed itself to massive expansion of primary and lower secondary schooling in an effort to bring all children and adults to at least a sixth-year level of schooling by the mid-1960's. In addition, 1961 was designated the year in which schools were closed for nine months so that 250,000 teachers and older students could go out into the countryside in a now famous literacy campaign. By the mid-1960's, Cuba was spending close to 11% of her GNP on schooling alone. By the late 1970's a very high percentage of Cuban children were finishing the ninth grade, irrespective of whether they lived in urban or rural areas. The adult education

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program had reached almost all adults on the island, providing them with the equivalent of six years of schooling.

The massive educational effort in Cuba is well-known. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that while the overall change in Cuban education came about because of the Revolution, expansion took place in several stages, each stage largely a function of the economic development policy being followed in the particular period. We deal with this at length in our study; however, to summarize briefly, we can discuss three important stages in Cuban educational policy: 1) The period up to 1964, when Cuba thought that it could industrialize under the Soviet model and concentrated on developing basic education for workers and pupils, as well as a great deal of specialized schooling to produce workers with specialized skills. This was also a time of trying to develop rural primary schools, with the intention of producing a broad-based, highly skilled rural labor force. 2) In 1964 Cuba embarked on an attempt to build socialism at the same time as they developed economically. To create socialist values and norms meant promulgating socialist ideology through the schools. This was the period in which "schools to the countryside" were organized, schools in which students passed forty-five days of their summer vacation working as volunteers in agriculture, particularly in sugar cane. During this summer work program, students were also expected to study, and teachers worked alongside the students in the countryside. The "schools to the countryside" had (and have) an important political ideological dimension, since students were and are organized in brigades, and work to develop

consciousness of cooperation while on the job as part of the school curriculum. Since the brigades also involved teachers working alongside the students, brigades also tended to break down hierarchies and develop leadership among students irrespective of the authority of the teachers in the classroom. The point of the "schools to the countryside" was to increase productivity in agriculture by having students involved in productive work part of the school year. In fact, however, it seems that the students were not particularly productive in those forty-five days that they worked, but rather that the main effect of such summers was to improve the ideological preparation of students while in school. This ideology not only stressed cooperation, but it also stressed manual work, even for those students who would be going on to university and would be engaged primarily in mental work in their later careers. The concept of wedding manual to mental work and to elevate manual work to higher status in society has continued on in Cuban education and overall society to this day. While there are major contradictions involved in the fact that mental workers get higher salaries and other perks such as automobiles and better apartments, the differences between mental and manual workers in both salary and position in society have remained much smaller than in capitalist economies.

3) In the late 1960's the Cuban economy became devoted to the production of a huge sugar crop, and this single-minded commitment did much to expose the poor infrastructural and organizational situation in Cuba at that time. Evaluations of the "ten million ton" effort in 1969-70 suggest

that the main problem did not lie in raising ten million tons of sugar on the plantations, but in processing those ten million tons into sugar in a systematic and effective way. Furthermore, the effort drew away resources -- particularly labor -- from other agricultural activities and left Cuba with significant shortages of foodstuffs and other exports. In the wake of these problems, Castro and his advisors began to abandon moral incentives and the goal of building socialism at the same time as developing a material base for the Cuban economy. This process has taken a long time, but it has moved inexorably away from the non-monetarized, socialist society envisaged by Che Guevara to a much more Soviet model of industrialization and cost accounting. This does not mean that the idea of moral incentives has been entirely abandoned; nor does it mean that the socialist ideals of cooperative work, much greater equality between workers and managers, and the equal distribution of goods have been forgotten. The principle project in education in the early seventies was to improve the quality of schooling while at the same time develop rural life and agricultural production. "Schools to the countryside" continued for urban students, but a plan was developed by which almost all lower secondary students in the country would study in rural areas in "schools in the countryside." These schools in the countryside are boarding schools, with a student body of approximately 500 per school. Students work twenty hours a week directly in agriculture near the schools, in projects run by the Ministry of Agriculture. Most of the work was done in citrus fruits, and ultimately a large part of Cuba's citrus production was associated one way or another with the schools in

the countryside.

The schools tried to meet several goals and problems in Cuban education: 1) They attempted to offset some of the shortage of labor in agriculture by using students to do the simplest menial tasks in agriculture (picking, weeding, and other maintenance of the crops); 2) they incorporated the ideological methods of the schools to the countryside by having the students work in brigades in the fields; 3) by bringing urban students to the schools, they hoped to break down the barriers between rural and urban life and work; and 4) they attempted to raise student performance in school by having them board at the school and have monitors work with them in the evenings. Furthermore, since there was almost no rural secondary education available before this time, the schools filled the need of bringing rural education up to urban standards.

In the same period, the Ministry of Education created another kind of school, called the vocational high school. This school was and is intended to develop an intellectual and technical "elite" to go to university and act as the core of Cuba's new technical and scientific professionals and managers. There will eventually be one such school in each of Cuba's provinces with every primary school in the province sending at least one student to vocational school. And although all of the provincial vocational schools are supposed to be equal in their quality, the fact is that the first of them, in Havana -- the Lenin school -- still gets students with the highest scores on the secondary school entrance exams.

Thus, competition to get into the vocational schools is very high

and competition to get into the Lenin School is the greatest of all. From this, one could argue that there has been a distinct shift in the seventies toward academic excellence and competition in order to raise the standards in Cuban education. There is little doubt that this is the case, and the development of the vocational boarding schools is evidence of Cuba's turn toward developing an industrial base and increased efficiency in both industry and agriculture. But at the same time, the vocational schools have work programs associated with them. At the Lenin School, for example, where this work program is most developed, students perform productive tasks twenty hours a week, just like in the schools in the countryside. At the Lenin School, however, these tasks consist of producing simple manufactured goods directly in the school or working in an electronics factory which assembles radios and minicomputers nearby. Thus, even this intellectual elite-to-be must perform manual work twenty hours a week during the six years of secondary school.

since 1964

The most profound shift/in the philosophy of Cuban development seems to have taken place since 1975. Although there were indications as early as 1969 and 1970 with the "failure" of the ten million ton sugar harvest that such changes would take place, it was not until the first Communist Party Congress in December 1975 that the full extent of the shift in leadership's thinking became clear. In his speech of December 1975, Premier Castro discussed "the mistakes of the past," mistakes which included primarily the system of moral incentives and the attempt to avoid a systematic central planning. In essence, Castro was criticizing himself,

since it was he who had been largely in charge of picking and designing investment projects for Cuban development until that time. In his speech he also argued that Cuba needed much more developed university training and overall technological orientation. Until the early seventies, the university faculties had grown very slowly with emphasis being placed on primary and lower secondary school. Before being too quick to condemn this policy, it should be remembered that both the United States and the Soviet Union developed their educational systems in the same way: from the bottom up. In any case, Castro had apparently decided that lack of university-trained professionals was a major contribution to inefficiency in Cuban industry and agriculture.

After December of 1975 fundamental emphasis in Cuba was placed on the efficiency aspects of production, as well as industrial expansion and the mechanization of agriculture (which had already begun in the early seventies). In any case, this suggests that Cuba turned toward an economic development pattern much more closely tied with a Soviet style industrialization, which also represented a return to the kind of development that was first attempted between 1962 and 1964. The key to this development was the mechanization of agriculture, particularly sugar harvesting. We can now say that the problem of sugar harvesting in Cuba has largely been solved by the introduction of large sugar combines developed in Australia and Cuba. In fact, the Russians have recently built an enormous sugar harvestor factory near Cienfuegos. Therefore, it seems likely that at this time, about 80% of all Cuban sugar is being harvested by machine,

releasing enormous numbers of Cubans previously employed during the harvest as sugar cane cutters for other kinds of permanent jobs. (It should be pointed out that sugar cane cutting is extremely skilled work, and the need to have tens of thousands of such skilled cane cutters available for harvest created a situation in the past where Cuba was constantly labor short in agriculture. Now that this problem has been essentially solved, Cuba has been able to shift attention to using rural labor in other kinds of agricultural production, particularly citrus fruits, dairy farming, and meat production.)

Paralleling this development, we see in recent years a gradual slowdown in the building of schools in the countryside. The predominant reason for this, to my mind, is that the need to shift increasing numbers of Cubans to agricultural production seems to have diminished, and the increased emphasis on industrial production has prompted Cuban planners to re-emphasize the urban secondary school. But what about the other aims of the schools in the countryside? Aren't these being sacrificed as well? I believe that the estimates of how much Cuban boys and girls working in the agricultural plan are really producing the twenty hours a week in the fields has been revised considerably downward. At the time that the schools in the countryside were first being built, it was estimated that the work of the 500 students boarding at the school would essentially repay the current costs of operating it and even leave some output for paying off the rather high capital costs of building such a school. These estimates have proven to be impossible to achieve. As it now stands, the

value of student agricultural output is only about a fifth of what it had been expected to be (I have derived these figures from conversations with teachers at schools in the countryside, and they in no way should be taken as official estimates). But whether one-fifth or one-third, or even one-half, the fact is that student work cannot be seen as a financial panacea for the high cost of secondary education. Nevertheless, the concept of bringing urban and rural students to schools in the countryside continues to be an important one in Cuba, and these remarks should not be taken to mean that Cuban authorities have abandoned the fundamental ideological concept of combining agricultural work with learning while in secondary school (and even in primary school). This also supports the idea that moral incentives, while certainly way down on the list of priorities for Cuba at this moment, still underlie in some very important way the whole ideological basis for Cuban education. Cuban young people do some kind of work combined with every level of schooling, and this is part and parcel of their educational program. Furthermore, the work is done in groups and attitudes toward group work figure very prominently in the evaluations of individual students. In addition, Cuba is building a new kind of school in the countryside: this is the preparatory level of school for tenth, eleventh, and twelfth graders. So, while the construction of additional schools in the countryside at the lower secondary level has clearly slowed down, now similar schools are being built for preparatory students.

Yet there is a tendency for urban secondary schooling now to be

increased again, and we can't help but point out that this is entirely consistent with the shift in emphasis in the Cuban economy to industrialization. Similarly, the university has expanded rapidly since 1975, and much more emphasis has been put on economics and engineering than in the past. Cuba is gradually developing a more sophisticated form of central planning. The island, being rather small compared to most countries, lends itself well to such planning. But the main drawback to economic development in Cuba continues to be inefficiency, and Castro's call for increased cost accounting and better management has been slow to be implemented. Many on the left would argue that the emphasis on economic efficiency reduces the possibility of developing socialist values and more cooperative, interpersonal relations. Furthermore, the elite schooling system seems to be inconsistent with many of the ideals of socialist equality. Indeed, like other socialist (or state capitalist) countries, Cuba is developing an "elite" group of highly educated managers who, although they receive salaries which are no more than twice as high as the average worker, do receive other advantages such as possible access to a car and perhaps a somewhat better apartment, or living in a larger city like Havana. Such differences are a far cry from the analogous differences in capitalist countries, but they do tend to interfere with socialist ideals. Despite these criticisms, Cuba has made it possible for the mass of young people to achieve the highest levels of education available in Latin America today. And equality among Cubans is greater than in even most Eastern European countries. What Cuba will be like with a highly educated

and skilled population imbued by long-time democratic ideals is anyone's guess.